

## **The Myths Behind *The Fisher King***

The Fisher King is the guardian of the Holy Grail, which, in medieval legends, is the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper and which was used to collect drops of his blood at the Crucifixion.

Relate this to George W. Bush and the victims of Katrina, perfect example of the separation of the king from his subjects.

"The Fisher King is dying, his kingdom is dying around him," Gilliam says as he describes the various myths surrounding the Fisher King and the Grail. "He's a man who's probably seen too much of life - he's experienced betrayal and tragedy. His life is slowly crumbling, and his kingdom goes barren. He's also lost the Grail. It's the one thing that can save him, but he's lost the ability to see it and experience it. A fool comes along and finds the Grail right next to his bed and restores the king."

The fool, a pure and innocent soul, demonstrates the kind of compassion that can free the king from mortal anguish. Although aspects of both Williams' and Bridges' characters correspond to the fool, it is Parry, in retreat from his reality, who is clearly the more innocent soul.

"Parry is a man with a previous life that was so damaged that he had to create another personality," Williams says. "It's like post-traumatic stress syndrome: Some people respond to traumatic or tragic events by withdrawal; some even create other personalities. Parry is a creation - somewhat Don Quixote, somewhat Groucho Marx - but he's a creation designed to avoid a past event."

In contrast to Parry, Jack is "a cynical fellow who, underneath, is a romantic who's been crushed or hurt in some way," Bridges says. "At the core, he has a lot of goodness that just kind of pops out of him... he can't help it. The film's about redemption, about healing wounds and how giving and getting are really pretty much the same thing. My character really gets the ultimate gift by his giving, not by his receiving."

### **About The Production**

*The Fisher King* began filming exteriors in New York, then moved to Los Angeles for the interiors. With the exception of the Central Park scenes, Gilliam says, he was trying to show a New York that was "heavy, stone, monumental... as in a fairy tale. In my mind I was making a fairy tale of people like Lydia imprisoned in this great stone tower working in this publishing house, and bums living under the arches of Manhattan bridge in a setting that's Dante-esque."

In the myth, the Fisher King's kingdom is dying, just as he is, "so I pictured New York as all stone and brutal buildings, with no living things like trees and birds. I put Jack Lucas, who's actually the Fisher King, up in the most minimalistic, severe, cold building I could find."

To help him get the look he wanted, Gilliam turned to New York-based production designer Mel Bourne, two-time Oscar nominee who has worked on numerous Woody Allen films.

One of the film's most overtly fairy-tale-like locations is millionaire Langdon Carmichael's 5th Avenue townhouse. A massive, castle-like structure, it houses the Holy Grail, or so Parry imagines. The townhouse is actually the Armory, at 94th Street and Madison, which was made even more imposing and medieval-looking by the addition of stained-glass windows and gargoyles. Bourne also supervised the construction of an elaborate entryway and double staircase in California, which were shipped to New York and added as a facade to the Armory (Bourne, incidentally, takes a turn in front of the cameras as Carmichael).

In the interest of accuracy, the filmmakers even reversed the flow of vehicles on Madison in front of the Armory, because traffic on 5th Avenue, where the townhouse is supposed to be located, travels in the opposite direction.

In another scene, Gilliam choreographed commuters, not traffic, when he had 1,000 extras spin around the floor of Grand Central Station in a stately waltz. Parry has been following Lydia through the rush hour pedestrian traffic in the station when suddenly all these disconnected souls join in dance.

"The waltz is the only thing that I would claim total credit for because it wasn't in the script," Gilliam says. "A scene takes place at Grand Central Station, so I was there watching the rush hour develop, watching the swarm begin. It started slowly, then the tempo increased and I thought, 'My god, wouldn't it be wonderful if all these thousands of people suddenly just paired up and began to waltz?' And the producers foolishly enough said, 'What a good idea!' Bingo, it's in the film."

To film the scene, the production was able to take over Grand Central Station for two nights from 11pm to 6:10am, when the first commuter train arrives.

"It's a pretty terrifying way to work," Gilliam says, "because you know you've got to be out of there at a very specific moment. In fact, there are shots that we got right as the 6:10 train was arriving."

In spite of the production's good luck at Grand Central Station, filming in New York didn't always proceed smoothly. The filmmakers had found a trash-strewn location off FDR Drive for a scene in which Jack is about to drown himself in the river.

"We asked the city to leave these abandoned cars and garbage piled under there," production designer Bourne says. "Wouldn't you know it, they swept the area clean, so we had to bring in, at major expense, a load of trash and cars and refrigerators, stuff that had been there to begin with."

Parry's mystical New York also harbours evil and terror, which is personified for the former history professor in the Red Knight. Astride a giant horse and emitting what looks

like the fires of hell, the knight stalks Parry through the streets, a dark element in a film that, "however funny it is, however outrageous it is, is based on pain, on a tragedy, on loss," Gilliam says.

Keith Greco and Vincent Jefferds of R&R Design in Los Angeles built the Red Knight's armor, working overtime to realise the vision of Gilliam, Bourne and costume designer Beatrix Pasztor.

"The concept was of a 500-year-old incarnation of evil, of corrupted chivalry, that's disintegrated and smouldering inside - a Red Knightmare," says Jefferds. "Our idea was of an illuminated manuscript of a knight with all the flourishing heraldic fabric, so from the front he looks like he's swimming in burning fabric."

Beneath the Red Knight's frightening armour - made from foam latex - was stunt coordinator Chris Howell, who carried a 16-pound flame thrower atop his head that shot fire from his helmet. Creative special effects consultant Robert E. McCarthy designed the flame thrower, which used compressed gas and air. In addition to playing the part of Parry's worst nightmare, Howell was responsible for orchestrating all of the stunt work on *The Fisher King*, which entailed a lot of difficult "near misses" on the streets of New York.



**A cabaret singer, as played  
by Michael Jeter**

Two horses were used, both Percheron geldings - Lightning, who weighs 2,200 pounds, and Goliath, who weighs in at just under a ton. They are circus horses owned and trained by James Zoppe of Southern California. Each horse was "made up" daily by animal colorist Douglas J. White, who uses non-toxic, vegetable-based, hypo-allergenic paints applied to a natural henna base (both horses are white). Every aspect of the Red Knight was fully supervised by the ASPCA.

LaGravenese, speaking of the experience of making this special film, says: "At times it appeared that for some people working on the movie, individual journeys were being made towards their own particular Grails. This was certainly true for me. I hear it is common; that a movie you're working on can begin to reflect the life you're having around it. For that experience, and for the gift of working with such extraordinary people, I am deeply grateful to those who made it all possible." Edited by Phil Stubbs